

[Harlem Beauty Shops]

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FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 West 130th Street

DATE April 19, 1939

SUBJECT HARLEM BEAUTY SHOPS

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of interview
3. Name and address of informant
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 West 130th Street

DATE April 19, 1939

SUBJECT HARLEM BEAUTY SHOPS

The largest and most profitable profession indulged in by the Negro women in Harlem is the beauty shops. Beauty Culture takes care of over fifty percent of the Negro professional women as well as supplying jobs for a goodly portion of the male populace in the role of salesman, advertisers and in the actual field of male beatuicians.

The most widely known of the persons who took advantage of the knowledge that Negro women desire beautiful hair and soft attractive skin was Mme. C.J . Walker who cleared over a million dollars, through the sale of her skin bleaches, hair pomades, etc. The better known systems that are used by the several hundred beauty shops that are sprinkled through Harlem are The Apex, Poro, Nu Life, and Hawaiian Systems and the money make by the owners of the schools conducted by these systems contributes greatly toward the economic life of Harlem, and were they stopped it would leave a big vacuum in the community's budget.

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There are four general headings under which the shops of Harlem may be listed according to clientele. From 135 Street down to 110 Street known as lower Harlem on Eighth, Seventh, and Lenox Avenues, may be listed as the shops where the “average Harlemites” gets her 2 work donw done , from 135-138 Streets on Seventh Avenue may be cataloged as the section where the theatrical group gets its hair “done”, from 138 Street North on Seventh and Lenox Avenues to “Sugar Hill” which is above 145 Street is the location of the shops that cater to the Negro elites who dwell in fashionable “Sugar Hill” section, the numbered streets contain beauty shops which draw the bulk of their patrons from the particular locality from which the operators come; if the operator is from Columbia, South Carolina then the persons who are the clients in that particular shop are from that section of as close as possible. Hence there are four Classifications of shops, “Average Harlemites”, “Theatrical”, “Elite”, and “Hometown.”

I happen to be in a shop in the “Average Harlemites” areas on a Thursday just before the afternoon rush of the women who do domestic work and stay on the premises where they work and get a half Thursday off. I heard a grumbling conversation going on between two apprehensive operators. “Well it's Thursday again,” says the tall one. Soon the place will be so crowded with “kitchen mechanics” you can't move.”

“Yeh, “ it wouldn't be so bad, “ sighs the stocky one looking at her feet reflectively “if you didn't have to work so long. We won't be able to leave this shop until two o'clock tomorrow morning.”

“The Union did do a little bit of good by saying that we had to close the doors at 10 pm because we used to get out at five and six in the morning before,” said the first speaker.

“One of these days,” said the stocky speaker, “when this place is full of people who come in just before closing time, without an appointment, I'm gonna “jump salty” (fly off the handle) and “Throw up both hands and holler.”

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"It's sure no bed of roses," agreed the tall operator. We learned beauty culture to get away from sweating and scrubbing other peoples floors and ran into something just as bad - scrubbing peoples scalps, straightening, and curling their hair with a hot iron all day and smelling frying hair."

"Yeh," answers the short woman, "and you sweat just as much or a damn sight more and most of 'em are in a hurry - but I think it's a little better than housework - it's cleaner and you don't have no white folks goin' around behind you trying to find a spec of dirt."

"Oh - here comes one of my calkeener broads" (a woman who cooks in a private family). If she mentions her madam I'll choke her. You'd think on their day off they'd forget their madams. "Hello Miss Adams. Your on time," said the tall operator.

"Yeh," says Miss Adams popping chewing gum and all in a dither. "Got to make time. Me and my boyfriend got a little matter to straighten out this afternoon. He's got to tell me one thing or another. Then, we're gonna "dig that new jive" (see the new show) down the Apollo; then we'll "cut out" (go) to the Savoy and "beat out a few hoof rifts" (dance) till the wee hours then I'll fall on back to the "righteous mansion" (job) "dead beat for shut eye" (sleepy) but willing to "carry on" (work.).

"You sure are making the most of your day off," avers the operator, covering the woman's head with a bubbling shampoo and dousing her head in the sink scrubbing vigourously with a stiff brush.

"I didn't tell you what my madam said - hey take it easy on the "top piece" (head), yells Miss Adams as the operator scrubs 4 vigorously and looks at the other operator meaningly as Miss Adams mentions her madam.

"My, madam" resumes Miss Adams, "asked me what I had done to my hair last Friday when she saw it all curly and pretty. I told her I'd been to the hair dresser. She asked me how much it cost and when I told her she just looked funny and started to ask me how I

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could afford it. She needn't worry 'cause I'm dead sure I'm gonna ask her for a raise 'cause this little money she pays me ain't a "drop in the bucket." (not much).

I dropped in one of the "hometown" shops and saw a breezy well groomed man enter and make his way to the back of the shop saying "They're at the post. Don't get left."

The operators excused themselves handed the man a piece of paper which he copies. "Hey Ann", he asks "Is this 517 or 511? Your figures are so hard to figure out."

"517" retorts Ann, "You can't read. Better get them numbers right, 'cause they're hot."

"Is that the number man?" asks a customer, "Give me 370 for a dime. I dreamed about my dead uncle and everytime I dream about him 370 comes out."

The mentioning of the "number" as a dream "number" causes most of the customers and the operators to play it because they all believe in dreams. When the "writer" leaves his book is "loaded" with the 370 which thereby becomes a "hot number" (a number favored to come out which seldom does)

In another "Hometown" shop I found operators selling tickets to a Beauticians Ball, while the customers sell them tickets to a supper for the church or their own house rent parties.

When I entered a shop in the "Theatrical" area a male operator was washing a person's hair whom you assume to be a woman in slacks. When the person turned around it was a man. Yes, the theatrical men and a few non-theatrical men get their hair straightened and waved.

The conversation was about a currently popular star. The fellow who is getting his hair washed says, "Chick Webb sure pulled some "hep jive" when he signed Ella Fitzgerald up. I hear from good source that Benny Goodman offered gangs of money for her contract. Chick said "no can do." (no).

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"Yeh," answers a dreamy eyed girl getting wavy ringlets pressed over her entire head. "I remember Ella when - ain't changed a bit towards little Fifi."

"The Swing Mikado's been sold I hear", says one girl as a hot comb is pulled through her hair.

"The actors think that's "weird jive" (bad) says another, "They ain't commin' up to that tab." (Don't want to work for a private owner.)

I know what the jive is. W.P.A. says the sale is left up to the cast. They want to put us back on relief. Too many of us on Broadway at the same time. 110 of us in "Hot Mikado" and 75 of us in "Swing Mikado." They'll either take us out on the road or fire us here. If Equity takes us in then we have some protection, but they'll ditch us before Equity gets around to us. What the hell is the difference anyway? They got the money and they'll keep you right where they want to, unless we have a God damn riot, and how much good would that do? A hell of a lot don't fool yourself. Didn't we get jobs on 125 Street after the March 19th riot?

In the "Sugar Hill" area I found well dressed women pulling up in big cars. Their topics are the grave international situation, 6 the latest plays, the teachers discuss schools. I see where "Address Unknown" was a best seller for last month. The copies were sold almost as soon as they reached the book stores," says one.

"Oh yes," remarked another woman (wearing two diamonds and an imported wrist watch), from under her application of bleach cream. The author was very fortunate. At another time it would just have been another book - interesting reading of course but the story - then the book was published at the precise, psychological time when the "Madman of Europe" was shedding blood all over Germany. Result? A best seller."

Suddenly a man darted in the swanky shop with a bag and made his way to the rear, with significant nods to each other. The operators went to the rear singly. He was peddling "hot stuff" (stolen goods). The operator's make their purchase and hurried back to their

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customers. A nosey customer asks "What is he selling? Last time I was here I got some lovely perfume very cheap."

"Lingerie" says the operator.

"Reasonable?" asks the inquisitive one. "They have ten dollar tages tags . He sells them for three," answers the operator.

"Please tell him I want to see them," says the customer jumping out of the chair, with her beauty treatment half finished. With the apron around her neck she goes to the rear of the shop followed by more interested customers.

INTERESTING PLACES - THESE BEAUTY SHOPS.